

Nordic Lessons for Georgia's NATO Quest

Amidst the complex security dynamics of the Black Sea region and the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, Georgia's quest to join NATO inevitably begs the question: can Georgia's accession strengthen the security of the North Atlantic area? The core concern is Georgia's military defensibility in the case of Russia's aggression and the potential ramifications for the Alliance.

The recent NATO enlargement showed how hard it is to gain consensus among all NATO members. Analyzing Finland and Sweden's NATO accession process offers valuable insights into the substantial challenges facing Georgia's integration path. It also sheds light on the interplay between these challenges and the perception-driven narratives that frequently hinder progress without robust justification.

Georgia's NATO Integration Challenge

For NATO members to reach a consensus on Georgia's membership, it is crucial to address the outstanding political and security concerns. Two primary lines of skeptical arguments have emerged during the past 22 years since Georgia voiced its desire to join NATO at the 2002 Prague Summit.

Some members believe Georgia should undertake a more comprehensive and rigorous democratic reform process as part of its integration efforts. In contrast, others perceive potential risks associated with escalating Russian aggression in response to Georgia's progress on the integration path. The core question of whether Georgia could enhance the security of the North Atlantic area has consistently been accompanied by a series of subsequent skeptical questions:



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1. Can Georgia defend itself militarily in the event of renewed Russian aggression?
2. Will Georgia's membership in NATO increase or decrease the likelihood of armed conflict with Russia?
3. Will Georgia's accelerated membership in NATO result in Russia's formal annexation of Georgia's occupied territories, and how should the Allies respond to such a scenario?
4. Can Georgia be considered a reliable ally with substantial democratic credentials, or might its membership further exacerbate the challenges of consensus-building?

Georgia's ability to provide solid and convincing answers to these questions will broadly define its chances of achieving progress on the NATO integration path. In this context, offering compelling answers entails Georgia's capacity to demonstrate

its maturity and readiness to enhance the world's most robust political-military alliance. This involves more than merely crafting persuasive narratives or winning arguments in diplomatic exchanges.

The historic decision of Sweden and Finland to abandon their non-alignment tradition underscores the pressing necessity for innovative approaches to defense and security on NATO's entire eastern flank. Examining the underlying factors of NATO's enlargement in the Nordic region and drawing lessons from the integration process could assist Georgia in gaining a new perspective on its aspirations for membership.

Lesson 1: NATO Membership is the Only Security Guarantee

The seismic shift post-Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 reshaped geopolitical considerations in

the Euro-Atlantic area. Influenced by their robust defense capabilities and democratic excellence, Finland and Sweden remained outside the NATO alliance and enjoyed the image of self-sustainable states for decades. Both countries [score](#) 9.3 out of 10 in the democracy index and hold the prestigious third position worldwide. As strong members of the EU, they demonstrate a steadfast commitment to safeguarding civil liberties, contributing significantly to the European democratic landscape. On the [military front](#), Finland and Sweden boast robust armed forces equipped with cutting-edge technology and industrial complexes supporting advanced military production lines.

As Finland and Sweden recognized the importance of collective defense, NATO also demonstrated readiness to welcome them into its fold seamlessly. NATO's traditional caution in extending alliance to nations bordering Russia has been promptly overweighted. Notably, with Sweden and Finland's membership, the NATO-Russia border almost doubled. While the inclusion of Finland and Sweden in NATO increased the potential threats from Russia, these nations met NATO's core integration criteria, demonstrating strong defense capabilities and stable political systems.

The extension of NATO's collective defense umbrella provides the only genuine security guarantee, even for solid and self-sustaining countries.

This lesson highlights two critical factors relevant to Georgia's NATO integration. On the one hand, as demonstrated by Finland and Sweden's prompt journey towards NATO, defensibility, and democracy are essential prerequisites for integration into the Alliance. Accordingly, Georgia needs to prioritize strengthening its democratic institutions and defense capacities as proof of its commitment to pursue aspirations for NATO membership. On the other hand, as the Russian invasion of

Ukraine prompted Finland and Sweden to reassess their security postures amidst heightened regional tensions, it became evident that the extension of NATO's collective defense umbrella provides the only genuine security guarantee, even for solid and self-sustaining countries.

Lesson 2: Russia Reverses Hostile Rhetoric when NATO Enlargement Becomes Irreversible

Russia's game of geopolitical chess involves strategic moves and well-timed warnings. Linking Russia's [blackmail strategy](#) with its actions both before and after NATO's expansion to the Nordic region demonstrates that its threats often lack substance and are more bark than bite.

Initially, when the intentions of Finland and Sweden to join NATO were voiced, Russia's rhetoric was notably aggressive. Dmitry Medvedev warned of an "increased likelihood of a direct and open conflict between NATO and Russia," [noting](#) the risks of the conflict "turning into a full-fledged nuclear war." However, as the reality of Finland and Sweden's NATO membership materialized and Russia realized the irreversibility of the Alliance's engagement, Putin [struck](#) a less confrontational tone, expressing neutrality towards Finland and Sweden's NATO membership, declaring: "If Finland and Sweden wish to, they can join. That's up to them." This evolution in Russia's rhetoric, from aggressive warnings to a more measured response, highlights the blackmailing nature of its strategy.

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Russia's apprehension towards NATO enlargement is not rooted in fear of a direct military threat but in recognizing that it cannot disrupt or assert influence within Article 5 coverage. This lesson should

be heeded, especially in the case of Georgia, where Russia's blackmail strategy must not hinder Georgia's prospects of NATO membership. As Finland and Sweden's NATO membership unfolded with less dramatic consequences than initially warned, it became evident that Russia's aggressive stance is more about shaping perceptions and deterring NATO enlargement than a genuine intent to engage in conflict.

Lesson 3: Lack of NATO's Resolve and Weakness Provokes Russia

NATO's decision to expand into the Nordic region intended to reduce the likelihood of Russia escalating and attacking Sweden or Finland. A specific example of Russia's potential attack against Sweden stems from Russia's periodic military exercise, [Zapad](#), which aims to isolate the Baltic Sea region from the rest of Europe. Swedish intelligence agencies [identified](#) scenarios that could involve occupying the small Swedish island of [Gotland](#) and testing Western resolve to defend the territory of a non-NATO partner. If the NATO response mirrors the limited reactions to the invasions of Georgia and Ukraine in 2008 and 2014, respectively, the occupation of the island would result in the isolation of the Baltic States from Allied support and reinforcements, granting significant military superiority to Russia's forces in naval and air domains. Even in the unlikely event of a robust military response from NATO, the occupation of Gotland would directly facilitate the materialization of Russia's intention of joining Kaliningrad to Belarus by closing the Suwalki gap. However, this scenario became irrelevant after Finland and Sweden, including Gotland Island, were covered by Article 5, making severing of the Baltics from Europe neither feasible nor possible.

Deferring NATO membership prospects for Georgia and Ukraine, ostensibly to prevent provoking Russia, has historically yielded contrary results. Rather than mitigating Russian concerns, as was

the intent, it led to significant security crises between Russia and the West and seriously undermined the security of NATO's strategic partners.

Specifically, while Georgia was not offered a Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the 2008 Bucharest Summit, primarily in reverence to Moscow's objections, Russia launched a war against Georgia. Persuading themselves that Russia's conflict with Georgia was a one-off case, the allies swiftly returned to a "business as usual" a few months after the invasion. They opted to shelve the MAP and NATO membership issues for Georgia and Ukraine to appease Moscow. Having thus de-emphasized NATO's role in shared neighborhoods with Russia, the West prioritized the region's economic integration with Europe as a vehicle for pushing for reforms there — a move designed to be seen as less provocative to Russia. The failure to understand that even this soft approach reinforced Russia's 19th-century "spheres of influence" thinking was the prime reason for the West's sleepwalking into the annexation of Crimea and the Russian intrusion into Donbas in 2014. At the time, MAP, or NATO accession, was not even a part of Kyiv's political agenda, although this did not shield Ukraine from Russian aggression.

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The cases of Finland and Sweden, in contrast to Georgia and Ukraine, exemplify that, contrary to the Kremlin's propaganda, Russian aggression is not triggered by NATO enlargement. Instead, NATO enlargement is a response to Russia's aggression, aiming to forestall and deter potential attacks. This lesson emphasizes that extending the NATO umbrella stabilizes and discourages Russia from aggressive actions.

A MAP Dilemma

Many of those who oppose Georgia's progress towards NATO start from a larger argument that the membership prospects for post-Soviet states in Russia's immediate neighborhood are intolerable to Moscow and, therefore, are bound to provoke Russia into undertaking preemptive actions, thus destabilizing the security of the whole of Europe. With that argument, granting the Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia has become a source of divisions within the Alliance and created undue tensions. The underlying skeptical argument is that granting MAP can increase insecurity as it does not provide security guarantees; thus, if provoked, Russia might reciprocate with more aggressive actions. The forms of new aggression might include the formal annexation of Georgia's occupied regions or advancing 'borderization,' leading to the blockage of the East-West highway - the only road connecting Georgia's eastern and western regions.

This argument, however, appears to be outdated and irrelevant after Russia's unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine. Russian propaganda created a myth that it was provoked by threats from NATO - a useful propaganda tool for achieving objectives through blackmail and the fear of escalation. The chronology of Russia's aggression against Georgia and Ukraine clearly shows that the Kremlin follows its long-term strategy based on its calculus. Russia is reverting to aggression not when provoked but when it sees the opportunity to achieve its interests. Nothing suggests that Russia's aggression could be avoided by making concessions, while Ukraine's example shows the opposite. After digesting concessions on Crimea in 2014, Russia started the war in Donbas and later launched a full-scale war on Ukraine. Similarly, if Russia was interested in taking its aggression against Georgia to a new level, it would find a pretext for attack with or without MAP.

Russia has used the practice of stirring up and maintaining conflicts to blackmail neighboring states. Each time, it used the West's turning a blind eye to its blatant violations of international norms of behavior as a validation of its aggression and an opportunity to further test Western resolve.

As the lessons from NATO's recent enlargements show, demonstrating the irreversibility of Georgia's path toward NATO will stabilize the security of the entire region.

In Georgia's case, it is crucial to reinvigorate the discussion on the NATO enlargement process based on new realities and lessons learned. Granting MAP to Georgia could be the first step in this direction. As the lessons from NATO's recent enlargements show, demonstrating the irreversibility of Georgia's path toward NATO will stabilize the security of the entire region. In addition, as [argued](#) in this journal's previous issue, MAP would regain its initial function and serve as a practical tool to help Georgia prepare for its eventual membership.

A Way Ahead

While lessons from Finland and Sweden help better understand the bigger picture about NATO's enlargement, the central concern lies in understanding how the Alliance's collective defense commitment could align with Georgia's unique circumstances, notably concerning its occupied territories. A strategic solution to ensure Georgia's NATO membership does not lead to conflict with Russia could involve temporary exclusion of the occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions from the military component of Article 5, thus alleviating concerns of triggering a confrontation with Russia upon Georgia's entry into the alliance. This

could involve [amending Article 6](#) of the North Atlantic Treaty to explicitly specify the exclusion of these regions from Article 5 coverage in Georgia's accession protocol. By framing this exclusion as a temporary measure contingent upon the peaceful restoration of Georgia's complete territorial integrity, NATO can extend security guarantees to Georgia while mitigating the risk of conflict escalation.

In contrast to the Nordic states, in Georgia's case, efficient ways must be found to identify how Article 5 of the Washington Treaty can be applied while fully respecting its territorial integrity within internationally recognized borders. A historical precedent exists for Germany [joining](#) the alliance in 1955 with the occupied territories. Undertaking to "refrain from any action inconsistent with the strictly defensive character of that Treaty," the Federal Republic of Germany and the Allies took a joint commitment to work towards peaceful reunification while temporarily excluding Soviet-Occupied East Germany from Article 5 coverage. Differences between Germany's and Georgia's cases are stark; however, this example once again highlights that if the Allies see a clear benefit of the enlargement, political solutions can be found even to the monumental obstacles such as occupation.

To show the clear benefit of Georgia's NATO accession, there is a need to demonstrate the country's commitment and progress in strengthening democracy and defense capabilities. At this point, for some Allies, Georgia's integration process does not appear to enhance Euro-Atlantic security in the light of the non-stable political, economic, and security environment. Türkiye and Hungary's bargain with the enlargement process added salt to the existing wound, highlighting the risks of adding more Allies with fragile democratic resilience and vulnerabilities in foreign policy alignment with NATO's common priorities. Another problematic area is the insufficient development of self-defense capabilities, which should be an es-

sential deterrence against foreign aggression and could provide an initial response in case of aggression until the Allies come to aid.

To demonstrate Georgia's readiness to revive its dormant NATO integration process after more than a decade of "strategic patience," a visible shift is necessary for several vital components of state building as well as foreign and security policy, namely:

- Further aligning foreign and security policy with NATO's priorities;
- Ensuring political support from the Alliance by bolstering the internal reform agenda and democratic practices in line with the EU's nine recommendations;
- Consolidating the national security architecture by strengthening state institutions and coordination tools;
- Strengthening defense and security reforms to further enhance interoperability with NATO;
- Deepening military and security cooperation with NATO and the Allies;
- Encouraging and supporting NATO's deterrence posture in the Black Sea region;
- Investing in strengthening the resilience of the state and society against hybrid threats and malign foreign influences;
- Improving the conceptual and strategic documents on defense and security;
- Effective planning, implementing, and coordinating the NATO integration process;
- Undertaking closer coordination of the strategic communication strategy with NATO and key allies;
- Enhancing dialogue with the Allies on political aspects of Georgia's membership in NATO;
- Coordinating the NATO integration agenda more closely with other aspirant countries.

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On the other hand, NATO also needs to review its policy and strategy of enlargement in the Black Sea region and start taking decisive, bold steps toward extending the security umbrella to the most

exposed and vulnerable edge of the Alliance. Finland and Sweden's membership in NATO is a real-life example of the Kremlin employing various tactics and blackmail to impede the NATO integration of aspiring countries. Yet, post-accession, there is very little Russia can do. There will never be a blessing from Russia to move Georgia's NATO integration forward. Russia always was and always will be hostile to every NATO enlargement. Thus, an ultimate lesson for both Georgia and NATO is that the window of opportunity to accelerate the integration process should not be missed ■